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Hobo Advice

# Trainhopping 101: The Dangers of Trainhopping

(self.vagabond)

submitted 2 months ago \* by [huckstah](#)

Trainhopper / Hitchhiker

Let's face it. Compared to any other form of traveling, trainhopping is easily the most dangerous. Sure, hitchhiking is definitely a roll of the dice each and every time, but it's nothing compared to jumping on a moving piece of metal on steel weighing 15,000 tons.

Yes, trainhopping is definitely dangerous, but like anything else in life, it is substantially less dangerous, and even fairly safe, as long as you are educated and prepared.

Let's go over a few of the key dangers associated with hopping freight trains:

## 1) Determining the Speed of a Train:

The biggest mistake that most greenhorns (rookies/newbies) make is trying to catch a train that's going too fast, or worse,

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trying to jump off a train that's going too fast.

You must understand that when looking at a train from a far distance (20 meters plus), your eyes are being tricked into thinking a train is going slower than they actually are, and this is simply a matter of perception.

Trains are very large, which makes the tracks and surrounding landscape seem quite small. Because the train appears so large, your eyes are tricked into thinking that the train is going much slower than it actually is. At the point that you actually start running next to the train to make your hop, you realize it is going much faster than you actually assumed, and your hop has gone horribly wrong. This typical mistake can easily result in disaster, including death.

To avoid this, always remember to count the bolts of the train wheels. There are 3 main bolts that are centered on a train's wheel, and if the train is moving too fast for you to accurately count all 3 bolts, don't risk your life by trying to make a grab.

Jumping off is even trickier. When you are standing on the train, ready to jump off, the ground appears to be going much slower than it actually is. Once again, the size of the train compared to the distance and speed of the ground passing by will make you assume it's a safe jump, when in actuality it's extremely dangerous. Always remember to be patient, and just wait for the train to get to a slow enough level that you are absolutely 100% SURE is safe. Don't go with "uhhh maybe", because that could be your final thoughts. It's much safer to NOT get enough, and just wait for the train to get to its next stop, however far that distance

Vagabonds, Hobos, Hitchhikers, Trainhoppers, Squatters, Rubbertramps, Backpackers, and more.

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is or however inconvenient it may be for you. Better than dead, that's for sure.

However, if you do have to jump off the train while it's still moving, you must understand how to "land" without busting your ass. When you hit the ground, you are going to have tons of forward momentum from the train you just jumped from, so you MUST hit the ground RUNNING! This is a very tricky thing to learn, and most people bust their ass and eat rocks if they aren't prepared for it. Also, never wear your bag when you jump off, as it will throw off your bodyweight ratio and cause you to fall and eat shit. Throw your bag off the train first, and then then jump off. It's much better to walk back 25 meters to grab your bag as opposed to jumping off and possibly injuring yourself.

## 2) Avoiding Getting Caught:

Other than getting killed, your next biggest worry as a trainhopper is getting caught, fined, or even worst, arrested.

When getting busted, most of the time it's the train-yard security, known as a "Bull", that is responsible for finding you and kicking you off the trains.

Contrary to popular belief, railroads bulls do not actually physically beat or assault hobo's based on simply catching them on a train. However, if you wish to become violent and physically threaten them, they have every right to beat your ass, and I assure you they are well-equipped with loaded guns, pepper spray, and clubs. Do not FUCK with bull's.

Nine times out of ten, a bull will simply ask you to leave the yard. On the 10% they are a fucking prick, or if you're simply being

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disrespectful, they will gladly write you a ticket for trespassing on railroad property, which can be upwards of 500\$ in fines.

Even worse, in a few rare towns, they will arrest detain you for a few a few days, or even weeks. Although rare, this has happened to many trainhoppers, in a few particular towns.

If you want to avoid bulls, security, do NOT go into the train yard. It's that simple. Bull's are meant to protect the train yard, and the further away you are from the yard, the less likely you are to being caught. It's as simple as that.

However, a hobo can't always catch a train outside of a train-yard , and we SOMETIMES have to enter the yard. In this case, ONLY enter a trainyard at night, not during the day!

Not only is it much darker at night and easier to pass through the yard undetected, but also at night-time the bull is likely sitting in his shack and playing on Facebook, as opposed to scouting the yard and looking for hobo's. It's a win/win for hobo's, and it also keeps hobo hop-out spots from getting "blown up" with extra security. NEVER go into the train-yard during the day! NIGHT-TIME ONLY!

### **3) Hop Sober:**

Many hobo's have died from getting drunk or doing drugs while trying to hop a freight train. Sometimes they pass out on the tracks, get run-over in a busy yard, misjudge their "hop", along with tons of other dumb shit that involves being drunk/high around moving trains. It's just stupid.

Just like anything else in life, especially a life involving hopping

freight trains, you want to be extremely clear-minded and sober while doing this. It's dangerous! Many hobo's and dirty kids have died while being drunk or high on the rails, and this is causing increased railroad security which makes it much more difficult for future train-hoppers.

If you want to drink or do drugs, that's great, but wait till you are safe at camp, NOT while you are trying to hop a freight-train or enter a train-yard. This golden rule has kept me alive for 10 years on the rails, and I try to tell it to every oogle, gutterpunk, and greenhorn I meet.

#### **4) Ride Safe (Slack Warning):**

Just because you have hopped the train safely and the train has pulled out of the yard, you are still not completely. Obviously trains are most dangerous while moving, and now YOU are on a moving train. This is definitely not a time to relax or let down your guard, yet.

The worst killer of hobos is SLACK. Slack can build-up between the knuckles (joints) of each car, lossening the tension of a long string of cars. If the train happens to slow down or accelerate, such as going around a long curve, that slack will SUDDENLY "pop" and your train car will give a very violent jerk. If you happen to be standing up on the porch of a train car, or standing by the doorway of a boxcar, you'll be instantly thrown to the floor, or even more likely and worse, thrown off the train car completely. Always maintain 3-POINTS OF CONTACT when riding/standing on a traincar. Two feet, one hand, etc.

Also, what if an emergency occurs on the track and the conductor



has to slam the brakes on? Once again, if your standing up and goofing around, you're going to be knocked off your feet.

Aside from that, there are tons of other unpredictable things that can happen on trains: derailment, mechanical failure, bad tracks (especially where rails switch/split), inexperienced conductor, faulty car equipment, obstacles on tracks, etc. These can all cause sudden jolts that can easily send a hobo to their death.

If you have to stand-up to piss or enjoy the view, maintain those 3 points of contact, and don't make it a long-term habit. For the majority of your ride, you will want to be sitting down, and always ready to lay low whenever you come to a railroad crossing, town/city, or yard. This is for your own safety.

## **5) Weather:**

During the summer or winter, the metal can sometimes be too hot or cold to firmly grip on, sit on, or lay on in a comfortable manner. Also, if it's recently rained and the metal is wet, it can be very slippery when trying to grip on to. Furthermore, metal just isn't a comfortable thing to grip for a long period of time anyway. In these cases, I always carry CARDBOARD. The cardboard will insulate your ass and body from the cold/hot metal on the train car. Never, ever hop a train in the winter time without cardboard or some other form of insulation, or you will deeply, deeply regret it.

Also, always carry bandana, and I tie the bandana around a piece of metal railing such as the car ladder) of the traincar in a knotted loop. Now the bandana serves as something to grip and hold on, while my hands stay safe and clean from the metal rails. A bandana will also help you when going through long tunnels in

which the tunnel potentially builds up toxic fumes from the trains exhaust. Wet your bandana, and cover your mouth and nose. It's not the best filter, but it's far better than doing nothing. This is an old hobo trick that has kept us alive for over 100 years.

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[–] **LowlySwitchman** 38 points 2 months ago

Avoid the head five cars. Conductors are supposed to check the head five cars prior to departure. I've caught so many of y'all riding the head five, or in trailing units. Personally, I don't care if you ride. I'm not going to give you over to the man. There are some that will though.

[permalink](#)



[–] **huckstah** **Trainhopper / Hitchhiker** **S** 32 points 2 months ago

You're a great example of the railroad workers I meet on the rail. Thanks for letting us ride, and we'll stay low and out of your way, boss :)

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **illpoet** 10 points 2 months ago

good advice, also if you can get near a yard you'll find more trains moving slowly.

[permalink](#)



[–] **scheda** 11 points 2 months ago

I was really confused at the part about always carrying a banana. Then I realized it was a typo.

[permalink](#)



[–] **huckstah** **Trainhopper / Hitchhiker** **S** 31 points 2 months ago

Nope I meant banana. We use banana's for scale to judge how fast trains go. That's where the original "banana for scale" thing got famous from when it hit Reddit, from hobo's.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **user34567** 0 points 1 month ago

How do you use a banana to judge the speed of a train???

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **AmorphousGamer** 5 points 1 month ago

Throw it at the train. If it explodes disastrously, the train is probably moving too fast.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **[deleted]** -4 points 2 months ago

Dear lord of spaghetti, hear my call.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **huckstah** **Trainhopper / Hitchhiker** **S** 5 points 2 months ago

Uhhhh who?

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **[deleted]** 2 points 2 months ago

Flying spaghetti monster

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **CXR1037** 8 points 2 months ago

I know it's oft-cited, but I don't really like the counting bolts method for approximating safe train speed. There are just too many variables: you and your level of athleticism, your footwear, the ground surface, the level of light, etc.

For example: I've caught trains going 16MPH (that's what the DPU's speedometer said, anyway). That was outside of a yard, with very little gear, on nice, level ground, wearing trail running shoes. I'm not an athlete but I'm capable of running, so it was pretty easy.

Then I've seen fat people with huge packs and holding jugs of water, standing in deep, thick ballast with holes and debris all over the place to fall into. Pretty much anything not stopped is too fast.

I try to avoid putting myself in a position where I have to blindly jump on. Usually I get there early, make sure there's nothing to trip on, make sure my legs are working, etc.

To nitpick one other thing, I've noticed most bulls going straight to tickets. I don't know if this is just a West coast thing or a new policy or what, but I've heard less and less stories of just getting kicked out of the yard.



[permalink](#)



[–] **huckstah** Trainhopper / Hitchhiker S 6 points 2 months ago

I carry alot of weight, sometimes upwards of 60lb's, so counting the bolts is useless to me. If it's going faster than 10, I'm fucked, whether I can count the bolts or not.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **jkloibrb69** 9 points 2 months ago

You forgot to mention having some idea of what materials you are riding next to. Grain? Fine. Corn syrup. Fine. Diesel/Fuel oil? Maybe hop the next one if you can.

[permalink](#)



[–] **willthisworkforyou** Trainhopper / Hitchhiker 4 points 2 months ago

when Im on a train I also try to be mindful that the train could go into emergency at any moment, so I avoid putting my body in positions that would fuck me up if it happened.

[permalink](#)



[–] **huckstah** Trainhopper / Hitchhiker S 4 points 2 months ago

Yep, I personally try to keep one hand gripped to a part of the train if I have to stand up or anything. Slack can knock you off without any warning.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **matter472** 1 point 1 month ago

What if you hooked onto something w climbing gear of some sort. I don't know anything about the subject just wondering and thanks for the interesting read I've met many cool rail riders in Richmond and I always like to help out when I can, they are mostly really nice and interesting to have a beer with.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **Mentat-42** 1 point 1 month ago

I am late to the party, but I'm considering hopping trains for awhile. I guess my biggest question is this; Can you tell/feel when slack is built up between the train cars? Cause that's the part that freaks me out the most. A bucking train sounds like it could be extremely dangerous, even when not standing.

[permalink](#)



[–] [huckstah](#) [Trainhopper / Hitchhiker](#) [S](#) 1 point 1 month ago

If you're sitting down, it's no problem dude. It's when your standing near the edge of the boxcar door or standing at the edge of the train car's porch that it can be dangerous.

If you're sitting down, your weight and gravity will keep you safe, I assure you (I'm pretty skinny, trust me).

Nope you can't feel when the slack builds up. It's something that slowly happens as the train accelerates and decelerates on hills and curves, and all of a sudden the culmination of slack in each individual car builds up slowly to a point where it inevitably buckles and tightens up. No way to predict/hear/see when that will happen.

If you stand, HOLD on to something. If you can follow that rule, don't even worry about the rest, you'll be fine :)

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] [Mentat-42](#) 1 point 1 month ago

Cool, good to know =]

Also, how many dangerous encounters have you had with rough characters? I know a handy knife/blunt weapon might be useful, if only to scare away and defuse the situation.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)

[+] [\[deleted\]](#) 1 month ago\* (2 children)

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